



## USING QUESTION-AND-ANSWER SCAFFOLDING STRUCTURE (QASS) TO TEACH STUDENTS WITH AUTISM TO COMPOSE FREE VERSES

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### **Abstract:**

High functioning students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) manifest rigidity in their thought and behavioural patterns, which are often regarded as negative and challenging trait that disadvantage them in their learning. As a result, their teachers often dismiss them as incapable of literary appreciation and so exclude them from rich and meaningful literary experiences which include reading classics and creative writing. However, the author, a former mainstream school teacher and university academic, of this paper firmly believes that literary appreciation and creative writing could still be taught to such students by tapping on their thought and behavioural rigidity and utilise it as a teaching tool to teach them how to create free verses. In this paper, the author has created a scaffolding strategy – Question-and-Answer Scaffolding Structure (QASS) – and also illustrated how he has used it to teach his students with ASD to create free verses.

**Keywords:** autism spectrum disorder, free verses, QASS, scaffolding strategy

### **1. Introduction**

In recent years, teachers in mainstream schools are beginning to see more students with autism or autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in their classes. More often than not, these students, who have been diagnosed with high-functioning autistic disorder (HFAD), display rigidity in their thought and behavioural patterns and they prefer to stick to their own familiar routine than trying something novel. As a result, they are often mistaken by teachers to be difficult students with a stubborn streak to work with and, at the same time, they are misperceived as intellectually challenged and socially inept.

Being a former teacher (taught in both mainstream school and special needs school) myself, I used to think like most regular school teachers that students with ASD could never understand literary appreciation or learn to appreciate literature (e.g., through poetry recitation or composing a poem or verse). If these students do, we often regard them as a rare savant like Raymond Babbit in the movie *Rainman* – a common misperception of general public about autism.

Briefly described, ASD is a pervasive developmental disorder as a result of abnormal development and function of the brain (e.g., de Fosse et al., 2004; Paul et al., 2014; Vidal et al., 2006) but research on its causes is still inconclusive. For the latest definition of ASD, readers can refer to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5<sup>th</sup> Edition (DSM-5) (American Psychiatric Association, 2014) for more detail as it is not within the scope of this paper to discuss about its symptomatological criteria, causes or prevalence. In this paper, my goal is to share how I have tapped these traits of rigidity and routine observed in autism and utilize them to teach these students to compose their own free verses.

### **Pedagogy to be adapted for Teaching Students with ASD**

According to Lim and Chia (in press), “students with ASD are often excluded *by their teachers* from the rich and meaningful literary experiences like literary appreciation, reading and writing stories, book clubs, acting and performing and list can go on because many ill-informed educators often think that students with autism are incapable of literary appreciation” (p.xx; words in italic are additional). If teachers are to provide literary opportunities for students with ASD, it is time for them to reconceptualise what a literate community ought to be, reject wrong assumptions about ASD, and prepare to take a bold perspective that students with ASD are complex literacy learners (Kluth, 2007). In other words, back in a typical mainstream classroom, teachers should be prepared to challenge and question the current pedagogy “that *has often marginalised students with ASD* or other disabilities and create communities that promote all students to teach each other, to showcase talents, take risks, to create, to collaborate and to see themselves as readers, writers, and thinkers” (Kluth, 2016, para.2; words in italic are additional).

In a recent report from Health e-News (2013), Dr Marc Tasse, director of Nisonger Centre at the Ohio State University Wexner Medical Centre, led a research team to conduct a 42-week study on using a specific therapy known as the Hunter Heartbeat Method to teach Shakespeare texts to twenty students with ASD from school in the Columbus area to improve their communication skills. For instance,

Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* was used in conjunction with a role-play to encourage these students to communicate and express themselves. The study also explored the use of the mind's eye of students with ASD to allow them "to explore imaginative worlds, which may otherwise be locked away" (Health e-News, 2013, para.8).

For teachers who are already working with students with ASD, many, if not all of them, are quite aware that the current pedagogy does not meet the learning (cognitive) and behavioural (conative and affective) needs of such students. Although the principles of regular teaching can remain the same, the approach has to be adapted in order to make learning meaningful, comprehensible and manageable for students with ASD. This is a form of assisted teaching known as *heilpadagogy*, which is also known as educational therapy in the West. In this paper, I have loosely adapted from the concept of *salutogenesis* – i.e., the deliberate attitude and process that focuses on active participation in positive health – postulated by Antonovsky (1987) to define this assisted teaching approach. The aim is to establish ease and order in both teaching and learning for the students with ASD. There has to be an eventual sense of coherence in the process of learning that begins with *dis-ease* (or *dys-ease*) and *dis-order* (or *dys-order*) for both the students with ASD and their teachers as it moves gradually through the process of *un-ease* and *un-orderly* development by the way of scaffolding towards ease and order, which should be the ultimate goal for teachers working with such students:

*Beginning* -----→ *Target Goal*  
*Dis-Ease* -----→ Phase of *Un-Ease* in development -----→ *Ease*  
*Dis-Order* -----→ Phase of *Un-Orderly* development -----→ *Order*

In field of *heilpadagogy* or educational therapy, several scaffolding strategies have been already developed for use in teaching students with ASD. In education, the term scaffolding refers to a wide range of instructional techniques that serve to guide students in progressive learning through successive levels of transition support from easy and simple to difficult and hard concepts towards a better understanding of what they are learning. It is a form of assisted teaching whose goal is to assist students to attain higher levels of comprehension and skill acquisition that otherwise they would have been unable to attain without assistance. Hence, scaffolding is regarded as an essential component in effective teaching, and teachers use many different forms of instructional scaffolding to help their academically weak students, slow learners as well as those with learning disabilities. Moreover, scaffolding is used to bridge or close learning gaps, that is, what I would term as *knowledge loophole* between what the

students have learned or known and what they are expected to know from learning to be able to perform a certain taught task. It also means that a student must possess a certain level of capacity (innate) to understand and an acquired level of ability to learn and do a given task that is appropriate for his/her age or maturity. The student's level of performance to do the task successfully is his/her capability, which is the intersection between capacity (nature) and ability (nurture). It is important to note that one key goal of scaffolding is to reduce negative attitude towards learning especially when a student gets discouraged or frustrated when trying to perform a difficult task without help, guidance or comprehension.

One example of a scaffolding strategy is the Scaffolding Interrogatives Method or SIM for short – an intervention developed by Chia (2002) to scaffold important information using the schemata of *wh*-questions such as *what person* for *who*; *what thing* and *what happened* for the generic *what*; *what place* for *where*; *what time, what day* and *what year* for the generic *when*; *what reason* for *why* ... and so on; hence the name for the strategy which has been used with students with ASD and hyperlexia (see Ng, 2013, 2014; Ng & Chia, 2013, for more detail). It has been used to teach and guide students with ASD to learn how to answer reading comprehension questions appropriately basing on the information derived from the given passage rather than basing on their background knowledge or previous experience.

Another scaffolding strategy is the Autistic Logic System or ALS for short (see Chia, 2015, for more detail), a form of syllogistic reasoning or rational thinking that appeals to the way a student with ASD thinks, i.e., autistic thinking. The ALS consists of two steps – analysis and synthesis. According to Chia (2015), this scaffolding strategy is a form of categorical syllogism consisting of the major premise, the minor premise, and the conclusion or learning point. Each of the three parts is known as a categorical proposition consisting of two categorical terms – the subject and the predicate – and it affirms or denies the latter of the former. “Both the major and minor premises have one *term* (any word or group of words considered as a member of a construction or utterance) each in common with the conclusion: in a major premise, this is the *major term* (i.e., the predicate of the conclusion); in a minor premise, it is the *minor term* (the subject) of the conclusion” (Chia, 2015, p.268-269).

In teaching my students with ASD how to compose free verses, I developed a scaffolding strategy which I have called it Question-and-Answer Scaffolding Structure (QASS). I shall describe it in more detail in the next section.

## Question-and-Answer Scaffolding Structure

Before I delve on the scaffolding strategy that used in teaching my students with ASD how to compose their poems (free verses), it is important for the readers to know what a free verse is.

Free verse, also known as *vers libre* in French, is just one of the literary devices. It can also be considered as poetry – a kind of poem that allows one to express freely without literary restrictions, e.g., regular meter, rhythm or rhyme scheme, and it does not rhyme with any fixed forms. Free verse has been popularised by Walt Whitman.

There are three key features of free verse (Chia, 1988) and they are stated as follows:

- Absence or no regular meter and rhythm;
- No proper rhyme scheme or set rules to adhere;
- Normal pauses and natural rhythmical phrases.

As a result, I have found free verses easy to use in teaching my students with ASD to create their own poems in a controlled and/or structured way. Of course, there are always critics who will dismiss this way of creating a free verse or poem to be considered a “real” verse or poem.

In the QA Scaffolding Structure (Q=Questions; A=Answers), or QASS for short, it consists of three inter-connected parts:

- First, it starts with some idea coming from the student;
- Next, the student will go through the process of putting his/her thoughts together; and
- Finally, a free verse is composed by the student.

The steps to be taken in the QASS approach is that each question asked becomes a line in the *yet-to-exist* verse that is still undergoing the process of being composed. The answer to the first question provides title for the verse. The answer to the second question introduces the first line by relating to the title. The subsequent questions will also contribute their respective parts in developing the idea for the composition of the verse. There is no fixed number of questions (for developer lines) to be asked or provided to the students. The answer to the last question will constitute the concluding line that sums up the feeling or reaction of a student about the verse that he/she has composed.

Table 1 shows an example of the QASS chart that I have designed to help my students with ASD to create their own free verses without fear or tears. It has two columns:

- The column on the left is a list of prepared questions to ask a student; and
- The other column on the right is for his/her respective answer to each of the questions.

**Table 1: QASS Chart**

		Student's Responses	
		Questions	Answers
Scaffolding questions			
Title →		What thing?	
Introducer line		Like what?	
Developer line		What colour?	
Developer line		Can do what?	
Developer line		What place?	
Concluding line		What it feels?	

⇓

*The Free Verse*

Once all the questions have been answered, the student has to re-copy his/her answers without the QASS chart on a clean sheet of paper. That product is a free verse that the student has just composed with the help of a set of pre-planned questions to scaffold his/her responses that are eventually transformed into lines of a free verse.

Here is one example of how QASS (the act of creation) was used by TL (the creator), a student with autism currently attending a mainstream school, to create his free verse (the created).

	Questions	Answers
Title →	What thing?	Tiger
Introducer line	Like what?	Like a big cat
1 <sup>st</sup> Developer line	What colour?	Orange coat with black stripes
2 <sup>nd</sup> Developer line	Can do what?	Move without noise, stalk, leap and pounce on its prey
3 <sup>rd</sup> Developer line	What place?	Live in swamps, grasslands and forests
Concluding line	What it feels?	Awesome

The final product (the created) is as follows:

Tiger

Like a big cat  
Orange coat with black stripes  
Moves without noise  
Stalks  
Leaps and pounces on its prey  
Lives in swamps, grasslands and forests  
Awesome!

OH (2005)

Another way of applying the QA Scaffolding Structure is to allow my students with ASD to set their own questions on a blank QASS table and let them ask their peers to answer the questions. In this way everyone in class can be involved in composing their free verses and also be given time to share them with the rest of the class.

Here are some other free verses that I have selected from my students with ASD.

Rain

Rain drops  
Pitter patter pitter patter  
Sudden pour of water  
From the sky above  
I am drenched  
So wet  
I need to change into my dry  
clothes

JA (2004)

My Best Friend

My best friend is Peter.  
He is in my class.  
He likes to play soccer.  
We study and play  
together.  
We go to school together.  
We go home together.  
We travel in same school  
bus.

AU (2006)

Singapore

Singapore is my country.  
There are many people.  
Chinese, Malay, Indians and  
others  
A multi-racial, multi-cultural  
society  
I like Singapore.

SG (2005)

The main advantage of QASS is that it is easy to use and teachers and para-educators can come up with new questions depending on the theme (e.g., birthday party, pet, my hobby) or topic of interest to their students with autism. In fact, it can be used as a tool for creating differentiated worksheets.

Finally, here is one of my favourite free verse created by AS, a teenage boy with Asperger syndrome.

My Pet

Lives in water  
Orangy red like gold  
Caudal tail blossoms like a  
flower  
Bubble eyes, gentle and cute  
Goldie is her name  
My pet goldfish

AS (2003)

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